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*Limitele meritocraţiei într-o societate agrară: Şomaj intelectual şi radicalizare politică a tineretului în România interbelică* (The limits of meritocracy in an agrarian society: Intellectual unemployment and political radicalization of youth in interwar Romania) is a timely and well-researched investigation into the social history of the interwar period. The study contributes a “bottom-up” perspective to a number of important issues that, hitherto, the historiography produced within Romania has treated primarily within the explanatory frameworks of political and intellectual history.[1] Drawing on a variety of institutional archives, such as the Royal Cultural Foundations and the Ministry of Public Instruction fonds, a wealth of social and economic statistics, and period publications, Dragoş Sdrobiş argues that the field of education drew together and focalized the multiple, interrelated crises of interwar Romanian society. Accordingly, the book is organized into three major sections: “Intellectual models and intellectual labor in Romanian modernity,” “Higher education in interwar Romania: University overcrowding, the intellectual proletariat, and intellectual unemployment,” and “The village and university students in interwar Romania.” These sections illustrate the limits of meritocracy—understood here as both social practice and modernizing ideal—in a variety of social-educational fields regarded by interwar intellectuals and state makers as privileged domains for enacting policies of nation building and social modernization.

The analytical common denominator of Sdrobiş’s inquiries into these manifold social-educational contexts and their close relations with political and intellectual issues is the interwar quest for viable models of national identity and national integration. The author shows how this broader societal pursuit led to the ascent of nationalism in the universities and contributed to the right-wing radicalization of university youth. Importantly, the author sets these developments against the backdrop of an underdeveloped socioeconomic structure difficult to remodel and incapable of sustaining the rising aspirations of the country’s educated strata.

Drawing on contemporary sociological theory, the author applies a neo-functionalist model to explicate the malintegration between the elite-centered modernizing drive embodied by an increasingly technocratized state and educational system, on the one hand, and an agrarian-based economy not yet ready for a “scientized” social division of labor, on the other. The oversupply of university graduates constituted the primary cause of “intellectual unemployment,” which the author shows...
was a constitutive feature of the urban economy and a subject of frequent press debates from as early as 1927 (p. 146). The date is significant because it shows that these structural problems existed before the onset of the Great Depression. Hence, it is no coincidence that the same year witnessed both the founding of the Legion of the Archangel Michael and the appearance of the so-called Young Generation of intellectuals. It was the economic hardships associated with student life, the diminished prospects of social mobility, and the sheer depreciation of intellectual labor, Sdrobiș maintains, that constituted the root causes of student political mobilization and of the gradual radicalization of young people along nationalist lines.

The advent of the world economic crisis in 1929, Sdrobiș contends, accentuated the problem of intellectual unemployment. Consequently, the reinvigorated university-based, radical-nationalist ideological currents and groups, which first appeared in the early 1920s, expanded and reshaped their demands for a numerus clausus applicable to minority students (especially Jewish) into a broad "economic nationalism" whose goal was to promote the "ethnic Romanian element" in all sectors of economic and social life (p. 176). All this coincided with the rising appeal of the Legionary movement, which vigorously promoted said economic nationalism, and whose radical stance resonated with the mounting economic grievances and growing nationalism of public opinion.

Yet for all its social-scientific rigor, the book remains partially reliant on the teleological presuppositions inherent in classic modernization theory and some of its more recent (neo-)institutionalist variants. It also draws on a venerable "culturalist" approach to modernization, an approach whose origins in the Romanian sociological scholarship can be traced to Titu Maiorescu’s theory of forms without substance.[2] The author makes a convincing case that the practice of meritocracy did not find fertile social ground in interwar Romania. However, the analysis runs into trouble when it suggests that successful political modernization implies a sort of package deal that includes a democratization of societal values and increased individual autonomy. This raises fundamental questions regarding the root causes and the modern/antimodern orientation of interwar Romanian fascism. These are issues that the book does not tackle head on.

The author’s premise is that the rise of Legionarism must be understood as a structural by-product of the failed drive to modernize the country’s political economy, which he regards as semi-peripheral in relation to its occidental counterparts. Had he developed this line of analysis in a more determined fashion, Sdrobiș might have accomplished a truly systemic explanation as to why palingenetic language pervaded not only the various strands of youth-driven right-wing radicalism but also state-endorsed forms of nationalism. He might have shown that palingenetic discourse arose in response to the structural blockages hindering state consolidation and socioeconomic modernization. Yet it is precisely because these issues are tackled somewhat inconsistently, save the obligatory excursion on the self-perception and sense of mission of the "young generation" of interwar intellectuals, that the book resorts to the occasional pat explanation.

One such historiographical cliché is the presumed foundational "identitarian pathology" of Greater Romania and particularly of its political and intellectual elites. The root of this pathology, Sdrobiș suggests, resides in the self-appointed historical mission of Romanian elites to build a homeland for all Romanians. This nationalist fixation, the argument goes, rendered these elites incapable of (re)configuring the state so as to properly integrate the large numbers of ethnic minorities that came under its jurisdiction in 1918. Yet the way Sdrobiș frames the problem precludes the possibility of different outcomes, in that the drift toward elite-driven "non-constructive" forms of nationalism at the expense of "inclusive civic projects of a libertarian or genuinely democratic" character appears as well-nigh inevitable, particularly with the onset of the Great Depression (pp. 237–238). But, as will be shown, these familiar motifs, not least the classic dichotomy between "civic" and "ethnic" types of nationalism, are in fact called into question by the author’s own research and narrative.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this study is that it broadens the cultural sphere as a category of inquiry, recasting it as a preeminently social field of state-sponsored intervention. Sdrobiș’s analysis of the university system as a mechanism for the social control of youth and for nurturing an intellectual elite selected on meritorocratic principles does much to demystify—in both an analytical and broad ideological sense—the social function of the interwar intelligentsia. It represents a departure from the well-established historiographical focus on the politics of elite culture. The author makes a good, though certainly debatable, case that the interwar university system was based on the Humboldtian template. This was a model that, in contrast to the Napoleonic concep~
tion of the university, promoted science for its own sake rather than educational diversity in order to meet socioeconomic needs. Consequently, Sdrobiș contends, Romanian higher education was ill equipped to prepare the new elite for the multiple and often contradictory roles it was supposed to fulfill. These roles included the renewal of “Romanian” civilization, supplanting non-Romanian urban elites in the newly acquired territories, providing the state administration with technocratic expertise, and emancipating the downtrodden ethnic Romanian peasantry. The institutional actor that took it upon itself to bridge the tension between these multiple roles was the Bucharest Sociological School under the leadership of Dimitrie Gusti.

The evidence presented in Sdrobiș’s account makes clear that the Gustian concept of the “cultural state” constituted a type of integrative nationalism that was both “civic” and “ethnic.” It was “ethnic” because it aimed to ensure the predominance of the “Romanian element” in the state while granting ethnic minorities the right to a cultural life of their own; and it was “civic” because it sought to unite the university and the peasantry into great mission of national construction. Premised on the utilization of social-scientific knowledge as a guide to social reform, the Gustian notion of “cultural work” mapped areas of social intervention that aimed to transform the peasantry’s culture(s) of health, work, mind, and soul. Between 1934 and 1938, social work in the countryside was undertaken by large interdisciplinary teams of researchers and volunteer student activists working under the aegis of the Royal Cultural Foundations. This activity culminated in the short-lived Social Service (1938–39). Implemented right after the advent of King Carol II’s royal dictatorship, the Social Service Law made social work in the countryside a requirement for all university graduates and enrolled thousands of youth in Gustian-inspired programs. This point, it is worth noting, that in 1937 the activities of the student teams were coordinated with those of Straja Țării (the Country Watch), a pro-monarchy youth organization partly modeled on the Boy Scouts, and that the Social Service itself became the centerpiece of the royal dictatorship’s rural modernization program.

The book documents how the institutional activities of the Bucharest Sociological School thereby became integral to the monarchy’s efforts to combat Legionary influence over both the urban youth and the peasantry, despite the drift toward fascism by some of the school’s individual members, for example Traian Herseni. The activities of the Royal Student Teams were indeed mirrored by the fairly large system of voluntary work camps established by the Legionnaires by the mid-1930s. It is not surprising, then, that in 1937 the activities of the student teams were coordinated with those of Straja Țării (the Country Watch), a pro-monarchy youth organization partly modeled on the Boy Scouts, and that the Social Service itself became the centerpiece of the royal dictatorship’s rural modernization program.

**Notes**


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